

Woman faces year in jail after laughing at US attorney general confirmation hearing

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In an effort by the Trump administration to further criminalize and intimidate political opposition, a woman and two men face up to a year in jail and \$2,000 in fines each after being convicted Wednesday on charges related to their peaceful protest of the confirmation hearings for US Attorney General Jeff Sessions in January. The case has drawn widespread attention on social media because the woman, Desiree A. Fairouz, 61, was initially arrested for laughing during the proceedings.

Fairooz and the two men, who are members of the protest group Code Pink, were all found guilty of “parading or demonstrating on Capitol grounds,” while Fairouz was additionally convicted of disorderly and disruptive conduct. They now await their sentences, which they will receive at a June 21 hearing.

Sessions, a former senator from Alabama and early supporter of the Trump campaign, is a notorious bigot and authoritarian. In the 1980s, his nomination as a federal judge by then-President Ronald Reagan was rejected by the Senate Judiciary Committee after former colleagues testified to Sessions’ racist views.

Sessions was nonetheless able to continue developing his political career in Alabama, serving as state attorney general and then winning a Senate seat in 1996. He cultivated a reputation as a hardened reactionary and opponent of the democratic rights of minorities, women, homosexuals, immigrants and the broader population.

In the January confirmation hearings, however, the Senate Judiciary Committee sought to turn this reality on its head. When Republican Senator Richard Shelby claimed that Sessions’ record of “treating all Americans equally under the law is clear and well-documented,” Fairouz, who was sitting in the public gallery, laughed at the obvious absurdity.

“I just couldn’t hold it,” Fairouz later ~~told~~ the *York Times*. “It was spontaneous. It was an immediate rejection of what I considered an outright lie or pure ignorance.”

C-SPAN coverage of the hearing shows members of the committee looking around nervously after Fairouz laughs, while Shelby continues to read through his prepared remarks. Another video shot by a *Huffington Post* reporter shows Fairouz sitting quietly as four police officers then surround her, grab her, and carry her away. She eventually shouts, “Why am I being taken out of here? This man [Sessions] is evil... I was going to be quiet, and now you’re going to have me arrested? For what?”

Fairooz, who along with the other two Code Pink members pled not guilty and turned down a plea deal, rejected the prosecution’s claims that she had intentionally sought to “impede and disrupt” the hearing. “None of us planned to get arrested,” she said. “We just wanted to be a visible symbol of dissent.”

Although lawyers for the Department of Justice (DOJ) focused most of their case on Fairouz’s vocal protests over being forcibly removed from the Senate chambers, they also claimed that her laughter itself was a criminal offense. “I would submit that laughter is enough, standing alone,” to convict Fairouz, said DOJ attorney David Stier in his closing statements.

In an indication of the political motivations behind Fairouz’s removal and prosecution, however, press reports noted that onlookers in the hearing gallery had laughed at other times during the proceedings without incident.

Fairooz’s attorney, Samuel Bogash, drew a connection to another recent example of police abuse of authority, telling the *Huffington Post* that she had been given “the old United Airlines routine” and had reacted

as anyone “yanked” out of their chair would.

The removal of protestors from Senate chambers has become a semi-regular occurrence regardless of which party controls them. In 2013, during the confirmation hearings for President Obama’s nominee to head the CIA, John Brennan, Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein, then the chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, called the police on Code Pink protestors who denounced Brennan’s leading role in the drone assassination program.

While Senate Democrats made a show of opposition to Sessions’ right-wing views during his hearings (knowing full well he would be confirmed), they have remained silent on the obvious infringement on freedom of speech and political dissent contained in Fairouz’s prosecution. Since his confirmation, moreover, the Democrats have largely packed in their nominal criticisms of Sessions’ authoritarian positions, instead seeking to stoke up anti-Russia hysteria over Sessions’ contact with that country’s ambassador in 2016.



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